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Key Points of SNIE 36.4-83: PROSPECTS FOR LEBANON

The prospects for a lasting political reconciliation among Lebanon's confessional factions are extremely bleak. The Lebanese seem unwilling to make the concessions and compromises necessary for a lasting accommodation.

2 We can expect a weak central government which probably can maintain control over greater Beirut but which has to contend with autonomous Maronite and Druze heartlands and prolonged Syrian and Israeli occupation. The legal facade of the central government's sovereignty will continue, however, since no party favors formal partition. A de facto confederal or cantonal system might emerge within which many of the essential interests of most internal and external participants would be met.

The Gemayel government may gain a breathing space from fighting in which to begin political negotiations and arrange cosmetic deals with some Muslims. Failure to achieve real progress, however, probably will lead sooner or later to renewed fighting. The Lebanese factions will look to Syria and Israel for support to enable them to avoid making political compromises.

3 Damascus, not Moscow, determines Syrian policy in Lebanon, but Soviet support reinforces Assad's confidence. Moscow does not want a Beirut government that is aligned with Israel, or any solution to the Lebanese problem that has been brokered by the United States. Nonetheless, we do not envision direct Soviet military support to Syrian forces in Lebanon as Moscow has told Assad that it will not protect the Syrians in Lebanon.

4 Jerusalem hopes to avoid renewed military involvement north of the Awali, but would respond to specific Syrian or Palestinian provocations with airstrikes or artillery and would not tolerate a Palestinian presence in the Shuf below the Damur River or a Syrian dirve to Beirut. Israel will also continue to supply arms and ammunition to the Maronite militias and try to broaden its ties with the Druze and Shia. A Syrian move against the Maronite heartland north of Beirut would prompt Israeli intervention.

5 Syria is likely to avoid a direct military confrontation with the US as Assad believes he can attain his goals without significant direct Syrian military involvement. If Syrian actions provoke repeated US air and naval gunfire strikes against Syrian positions in Lebanon, the Syrians probably would defend their forces while seeking to prevent further escalation by accepting another cease-fire. Facing US air attacks, however, Damascus might decide to protect its troops in Lebanon with surface-to-air missiles based in Syria. The Soviets almost certainly would fire the SA-5s at US aircraft if they appeared to be attacking targets inside Syria.

An abrupt US withdrawal or weakening of support for the Gemayel government that enabled Damascus to dictate its own terms in Lebanon would hand the Syrians a major victory and create the perception that the United States had been defeated by the Soviet Union's most important Middle Eastern ally. On the other hand very real risks emerge from our involvement in Lebanon. It serves to take the pressure off the Phalange for further concessions and offers enormous opportunities -- especially terrorist -- for anti-US groups of every variety.

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